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Parental engagement and deficit discourses: Absolving the system and solving parents

This paper asks a series of questions to prompt critical, informed thinking around research and practice in relation to parental engagement with children's learning. The questions ask how we, who research and work in this area, acknowledge and deal with the discourse of a culture of poverty, whether and if the 'private sphere' of the family indeed remains private, what may be considered 'good parenting' and why. The questions go on to investigate the place (or lack of it) of gender in work around parental engagement, and looks to the future to ask what work in this field can do in the face of the inequities in society which have required the field to exist in the first place. Finally, the questions are reframed to form the basis of a new research agenda. Keywords: word; another word; lower case except names

Introduction

For many of us involved in research and practice around parental engagement, our ultimate motivations have been rooted in social justice and equality. We see a system which supports children and young people from socially and economically privileged backgrounds, and we dedicate our work to making the system fairer for all (Goodall 2017). Within this context, however, I believe that our work needs to be more critical, both of the system within which it takes place but also, and more importantly, of the presumptions on which it is founded.

This article aims to open the debate around parental engagement with children's learning, and its attendant body of research, and to extend the audience within which that debate takes place. The article will do this by posing a range of questions.

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The time has come to take stock – are we in danger of perpetuating the vey problems we are attempting to redress? Have we not only bought into but also unknowingly reproduced a neoliberal discourse that imbues our work? Have we, like the teacher mentioned by Gorski, "despite overflowing with good intentions, 'bought into the most common and dangerous mythos about poverty'"? (Gorski 2008).

Whereas once education was hailed as a great equalizer, an engine of social mobility, the current reality belies any such belief. Recent changes toward marketizeation of and competition between schools have 'left behind any ideals of equitable provision for all' (La Placa and Corlyon 2016, 6). Schooling is not, and cannot be, a great leveller as long as it is part of a system informed by a discourse of poverty.

This article will not be comfortable reading – it sets out to ask difficult and awkward questions. The questions to be addressed in this article are the following:

1. Does a discourse of a culture of poverty inform our work?
2. How private is the private sphere?
3. What do we mean by 'good parenting'?
4. Why do we ignore issues of gender?

This leads me to a final query,

5. What can parental engagement with children's learning do in the face of systematic inequalities?

Does a discourse of a culture of poverty inform our work?

Originating over 50 years ago, the term 'culture of poverty' stems from the work around small communities facing economic challenge (Gorski 2008, Small, Harding et al. 2010). The discourse itself suggests (in the popular mind and increasingly in policy documents) that almost if not all groups experiencing poverty share a common culture; Gewirtz speaks of a 'homogenising' of groups of families (2001, 375).

The discourse of a culture of poverty is one part of an interconnected web of ideas which, even if unconsciously, may have not only informed our work in parental engagement with children's learning but also have derailed us from the social justice, equity focus which many of us bring to our work. Gorski succinctly sums up social approaches founded on this discourse of poverty as being 'based on the indefensible premise that we can achieve equity by ignoring inequity' (Gorski 2008, 222).

The discourse gained prominence in the UK in the concept of a 'cycle of deprivation' running through generations (Gillies 2005). The problem with this concept is that there's a wealth of research literature showing that it is simply isn't true; "There is no such thing as a culture of poverty" (Gorski 2008, 33). Unfortunately, the discourse is far too embedded, far too pervasive, and far too well supported by other widespread concepts, to be defeated by something as simple as mere reality. Moreover, the discourse is convenient; it reinforces our current ideas (which have been in part, informed by this discourse), in an iterative, and ultimately damaging, cycle of presumption and myth.

This discourse of poverty has led to the conviction that poverty was a result of personal choices to do with attitudes and beliefs (Gewirtz 2001, Small, Harding et al. 2010, La

Placa and Corlyon 2016), which neatly ignores any structural issues involved. This discourse allows a simplistic analysis of inequity and disadvantage, seeing culture, rather than systemic issues as the cause. Significantly for those of us working to support parents, this culture is thought to be passed on through generations (Jensen 2010) allowing the 'blame' for poverty, low outcomes and antisocial behaviour (Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012) to fall firmly on individual parents and families rather than the system within which they are raising their children and families. (See, for a current example, the speech by the head of Ofsted in 2018 Spielman 2018).

One of the outcomes of an embedded discourse of a culture of poverty is an imperative for the state to intervene to disrupt the transmission of this culture. To this end, support for parents can become what Gillies terms 'reeducation' (Gewirtz 2001, Gillies 2005, 77); the programmes for parents themselves providing alternative values for parents to adopt. This association between parenting – or lack thereof – and 'social ills' relates back to the idea of a cycle of deprivation, which posited that poverty was inherited not just (or mainly) due to a lack of heritable resources such as money, but mainly because children took on the attitudes, values and practices of their parents. (Gillies 2005),

In this article, I am chiefly concerned with how this discourse plays out in relationships between school staff and parents/families. This discourse sets up the situation highlighted in the title: it absolves the system, by ignoring the institutional and structural elements that cause and perpetuate poverty.

There are two elements which are essential if this idea of a culture of poverty is to be understood in its relation to work around parental engagement. The first is the concept of 'othering' and this is inextricably linked to the concept of, and belief in, a meritocratic society.

Othering for absolution

Othering may be described as a way of distinguishing 'us' from 'them'; Rohleder defines it as: 'the process whereby an individual or groups of people attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them'. (Rohleder 2014, 1306). The process requires two simultaneous efforts: the first is in the process which constructs a group with which one identifies, and, as a reciprocal consequence, a group with which one does not identify (Brons 2015).

This process of othering leads to a binary division, based on an conception of what (or who) is 'culturally negative and subordinate' ; this (they) then act as a base from which to define what is 'culturally positive and privileged' (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000, 1243). This process acts to absolve the system in that, in conjunction with the culture of poverty discourse, it ignores the systemic issues which have led to groups of people (who are 'other' than the groups of people who are creating policy) being seen to be at fault for the effects of poverty and inequity on their lives, rather than examining the root causes of those realities (Gewirtz, Dickson et al. 2005, Gillies 2005, Gillies 2005).

Othering plays a vital role in the deficit discourse. It allows us to differentiate ourselves from those who are poorly served by the system; it forms the foundation of our meritocratic view of the world. It provides the explicative power of the divide between those who benefit from the status quo and those who do not. In relation to parental engagement in children's learning, in a comprehensive literature review of parental involvement in early years work, Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) found 'constant 'othering' of parents by staff' (242). We also see this at work in the language used around schooling, for example, 'professionals' (teachers) and 'parents' (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, Goodall 2017).

The merits (or otherwise) of meritocracy

If those who do not do well in society are personally responsible for their fates, then the corollary must, then, also hold, that those who benefit from the system do so also on the basis of values and practices, rather than on the basis of, for instance, being raised in a wealthy household and inheriting a fortune. This view is an iterative factor of the process of 'responsibilisation' (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2014), meaning that individuals, as agents, are responsible for their own destinies, in spite of any systematic issues which might impede (or support) their outcomes. The only way one can maintain such a belief, of course, is with a deep seated conviction that the system (by which I mean the political and social systems) is, in fact, a meritocracy (McNamee 2014).

In terms of our focus here, the meritocracy has become intergenerational, so the previous Prime Minister David Cameron attributed his success entirely to the way his parents behaved (The Telegraph 2010). This could easily be interrupted as an 'evasion of privilege' (Jensen 2010, 2), and a refusal to engage with or even acknowledge the effects of class, social hierarchy and wealth.

This again absolves the system; if those who have been successful have done so either through their own or, in this case, their parents' merit, then obviously the system is not itself to blame for those who do not succeed. Rather, the ability (or not) to succeed is seen to lie within the individual (or the family).

Yet the literature and our experiences tells us that 'middle class cultural capital is privileged and outcomes are not meritocratic' but instead are built on factors other than individual merit, hard work, stamina, resilience and grit (See, for example: Reay 1998, Crozier and Reay 2005, Reay 2017). It is clear that our current school system does not function as a meritocracy. As Reay (and many others) have pointed out, what is currently privileged in our system(s) is not – or not only or even mainly – merit, but

rather middle class cultural capital (Reay 1998, Goodall 2017, Goodall 2017, Kulz 2017)

How private is the private sphere?

> What parents do with their children matters but not as a mechanism to overcome educational and structural inequality
> (Hartas 2015, 33)

An Englishman's home may be his castle, closed and inviolate, but increasingly, an English parent's home has become a place of scrutiny and intervention (Wainwright and Marandet 2017). The private sphere of the family has, since the advent of New Labour's policies and a continued stream of policies and interventions since, become a public space (Gillies 2005, Wainwright and Marandet 2017).

The motivation for this intrusion into the previously much more (but not entirely (Wainwright and Marandet 2017)) private arena has been mainly three fold: altruistic, economic and political.

Altruistically, successive governments, particularly since the rise of New Labour (Gillies 2005, Wainwright and Marandet 2017) have sought to improve the life chances of children by supporting parental practices. Gillies (2005) points out that the current incursion into the private sphere of the family is justified on the grounds of the value this incursion will have for the next generation, in increasing their changes of social mobility.

The second impetus was economic. There is a prevailing view that early intervention in children's lives, including in the home, will save the state (and thus, the taxpayer – e.g. all of us) money in the long run (Goodall 2017, Wainwright and Marandet 2017). Children are seen as the main beneficiaries of the 'social investment state' (Lister 2006), which seeks to "invest" in people through empowering them and giving them

skills, rather than investing in a monetary sense. Although the idea first comes to prominence under New Labour, it is not hard to see how this continues, and how it informs the discourse of parental engagement. Families, and parents in particular, are now being asked to perform tasks which previously might have fallen to the state, while at the same time, facing reduced support (particularly monetary support) from the state (Jupp 2017). If parents are entirely responsible for children's outcomes, rather than being parts of a more integrated system including state provision of social services, then there is no real need for the state to invest in such services (Macvarish, Lee et al. 2014).

The third impetus is political, in that interventions around parents are aimed at producing citizens for the state. But not just any citizens; 'families and communities have increasingly been viewed as crucial in making 'suitable active citizens' (Wainwright and Marandet 2017, 213). There is a utilitarian discourse around education that sees it not just, or even primarily, as a good in and of itself, (Dewey 1897, Dewey 1916) but rather as a process that prepares the citizens of the future (Wainwright and Marandet 2017). The question then becomes, for those of us working in the field – is this an outcome we, too, desire? If a 'suitable active citizen' is one who fits in well with a manifestly and increasingly iniquitous system, do we really want more of them? Perhaps, instead, we should be aiming to produce unsuitable, active citizens?

Through these three aims, we can see a progression, from a concern for the individual child or young person, through to a concern with the good of the state, to a return to a concentration on the individual *who is good for the state.* The altruistic motive is restated but now the recipient of the altruistic movement is the state itself, not the individual within the state.

This narrative around parenting has almost come to the point that we are in danger of thinking not that schools can compensate for society(Bernstein 1970), but that the family can. This has come to a point which Jensen describes as 'the entrenching of parenting as the principle site for social renewal' (Jensen 2010, 1). 'Good parenting', which once was a private, family concern focused on the good of individual children, has now become an issue of national importance focused, ultimately, on the good of the state (Gillies 2005). The discourse of a culture of poverty and cycles of deprivation may well be comforting for those reproducing it; unfortunately that comfort does not extend to making these discourses either true or helpful. Arguably, these discourses have, in effect, been derailing much of the work around parental engagement for decades.

What do we mean by 'good parenting'?

> In the past decade, an absolute faith has been planted in the power of practices of 'good parenting' as the key to unlocking aspiration and compensating for social and economic disadvantage' (Jensen 2010, 1)

Much of the current political and policy world seems to hone in on the value of 'good parenting' as a solution to a myriad of ills, particularly around the behaviour (Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012) and the achievement of young people (See, for example, among many others: Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Goodall 2017, Whitty and Anders 2017, Hornby and Blackwell 2018, Jeynes 2018).

In the speech mentioned earlier, previous PM Cameron went on to make the astounding claim that 'children in poor households who are raised with that style [eg 'responsible'] of parenting do just as well' as those raised in wealthier households (The Telegraph 2010); there could not be a clearer declaration of the value placed on parenting or a clearer negation of the context in which that parenting takes place. And while there is

likely to be an element of truth here, in that those whose parents have done well in the current system may well acquire skills that are useful in their own pursuits of the same end, (See, for example, Crozier, Reay et al. 2008), those elements are not enough to negate the overwhelming influence of systemic markers of inequity.

For over two decades, there has been a policy focus on 'improving parenting skills' (Vincent and Warren 1998). But this is only half of the process – not only are parents' (particularly mothers') skills to be enhanced, they are also to be judged, and 'regulated'. This is a fairly obvious (but still troubling) outcome of the twin basis of improving children's outcomes and saving us all money in the long run; if both of these outcomes rest on parents parenting well, then obviously it is worth ensuring that they are, in fact, doing their job 'properly'. It is very useful to shift responsibility to individuals in time of reduced spending on social support measures (Vincent 2017). Parents, rather than any other factors (such as increasing child poverty) are seen as responsible for any less than favourable outcomes for children. This constant attempt to see children's outcomes solely as a result of the actions of their parents amounts to not only an obfuscation of the causes of inequality but a 'rewriting of the very terms of social differences and inequalities' which has its roots in the discussions of the 'deserving poor' (Jensen 2010, 2). The policy framework around parental support in England is 'driven by a particular moral agenda that seeks to regulate and control the behaviour of marginalized families' (Gillies 2005,7).

This discourse of responsibilisation of parents and parenting (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2014), is extremely useful for those who benefit from the system. The system is absolved; there are problems in society not because of the reduction in the welfare state and the support offered to parents and families but because those very parents are simply not doing a good enough job in bringing up their children (See: Vincent 2017).

This requires a concept of the family as an independent unit, divorced, as it were, from other social influences, responsible entirely on its own for the progress of the children and young people within it.

This responsibilisation of parents and the family brings with it the need for oversight of parents by "various experts who restlessly monitor and problematize the nature and truths of youth and families and the forms of regulation that promise to 'make up' these subjects" (Kelly 2001, 469). This desire to "responsiblise" parents can clearly be seen in documents such as the recent work from Demos, 'Building Character', which states at the outset that 'Parents are the principal architects of a fairer society' (Lexmond and Reeves 2009, cover). Parents must raise their children in such a way that those children not only behave in societally acceptable ways (Gillies 2005, Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012), but will also overcome any structural disadvantages such as poverty. It is a recipe for both compliance and resilience. The individual child is supported by responsible parents, who act on the advice of experts. The outcomes of the parents' action save money and the state is assured that the next generation, having been 'properly' raised, will be appropriately (but not overly) active citizens. The system, as proposed, is neat and tidy.

And static.

The system reproduces the status quo, with its attendant inequities and inequalities which many of us work to eradicate or at least lessen.

Daly (2013) discusses the way the state has begun to intervene in the lives of its citizens to ensure that they are able to enact 'socially desirable parenting' (160); this has required a shift from seeing parenting as something people pick up or learn to becoming 'an object of resource building and education and training' [ibid]. Parenting has become less about relationships and more about a set of skills (Gillies 2005, Holloway

and Pimlott-Wilson 2014, Vincent 2017), which should be learned from experts. Many of the programmes which come under the heading of 'parenting support' see the 'relationship between parent and child in primarily functional terms' (Daly and Bray 2015, 599). Daly et al (2015, 12) define parenting support as 'a set of (service and other) activities oriented towards improving how parents approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competencies". This reads more like a job description than a description of a loving relationship between parent and dependent child. Parenting, in this view, is not much more than a set of skills, which must be learned.

Deficit models and myths1

The deficit model of parenting (and eventually, of parental engagement) stems again from a personalized, individualized view of differences in children's outcomes and behaviour, traced back to how parents parent. The basic idea is that the gap in achievement between children from different socioeconomic groups is based on the families of these children either not being engaged in their learning, or not being engaged in the right ways (Crozier and Davies 2007, Crozier, Reay et al. 2011, Landeros 2011, Goodall 2017).

One of the most pervasive parts of the myth of the deficit model of parenting is that poor parents (e.g. parenting experiencing poverty) are also poor parents (e.g. parents who do not come up to expected norms of parenting. It is interesting that in English at

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[1] It should be noted that "myth" here is being used in the sense of "explanatory story" rather than "something untrue" Armstrong, K. (2000). The battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Chrisfianity and Islam, HarperCollins, London.

least, the popular discourse not only allows but linguistically encourages this identification of families in poverty with those who do not parent well; both can be described as “poor parent”, with the double meaning of the word reinforcing the connection between the concepts.

Another element of this myth is a prevailing notion that parents in poverty are uninterested in their children’s learning, and therefore are reluctant to engage with schools and are, as a consequence, “hard to reach” (Crozier and Davies 2007, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Goodall 2017). The research has shown for some time that this list of beliefs is not true. Families across the economic spectrum tend to hold similar beliefs about education (Gorski 2008).

This idea of deficiencies in parenting (if not deficient parents) is closely tied to the idea of a culture of poverty as well as to the concept that individuals, not the system are responsible for realities such as poverty and exclusion. ‘The socially excluded are not seen as victims but as failures in self-governance (Gillies 2005, 837). In relation to parents, again this brings the focus back to persons rather than systems, and puts ‘the focus on the soft skills of parents, their characters, their aspirations, and their temperament… with blame falling on individual parents who fail rather than on their economic circumstances’ (Vincent 2017, 543).

Why do we ignore issues of gender?

Much of this increased scrutiny of parents has centred on mothers. Even though the words ‘parents’ and ‘parenting’ are used, in reality the discourses remain about mothers and mothers’ work (Gewirtz 2001, Gillies 2005, Shuffelton 2015). Women remain the primary carers for children, so these discussions impact primary on women. The gendered dynamics between a mostly male cadre of experts giving advice to parents who are, in reality, overwhelmingly female, should not go unnoticed (within the

category of ‘expert’ here must be included policy makers and authors of influential reports).

Where once being a good mother was about keeping one’s children safe, healthy and well fed, we have moved to a situation in which women are expected ‘to put their children’s needs first and follow expert guidance on investing physically, emotionally and financially to ensure the best outcome’ (Lowe, Lee et al. 2015, 16). We are now in an age of what has been described as intensive mothering; mothers are not only asked to bear increased burdens for their families, but also increasing scrutinized as they do so (Elliott and Bowen 2018). Mothers are not considered to be instinctively able to perform these tasks (Story 2003). The idea that mothers need help to do their family based worked is not new; it rests on the twin basis of mother’s responsibility for their families, and a belief in a mother’s inability to carry out these functions (Apple 1995). However, this discourse, while ostensibly addressed to all parents or even all mothers, in fact relates primarily to mothers who have been ‘othered’ by the system (or, in the system’s view, have excluded themselves). This is particularly pernicious when what mothers are enjoined to do to be ‘good mothers’ is beyond the reach of many. In spite of the universal language in which this narrative is often couched, it is clearly aimed more at parents facing socioeconomic challenges than at others. Gillies suggests that this is nothing less than a ‘drive to equip working class parents with the skills to raise middle class children’ , based on a ‘long running patholgisation of working class parenting’ and a normalization of the experiences of the middle classes (Gillies 2005, 838).

This discussion of how to be a good mother is ubiquitous (Vincent 2017). And, almost always, the discussions are not seen taking place within a given context, but rather as though ‘mothering’ happens outside the boundaries of class, poverty or any other

constraining factor. The discussions also have the rather odd outcome of removing the personhood and value of the woman who is enacting the role of mother; she becomes not much more than a means to an end, with that end being the outcomes of her child/ren (Jensen 2010). And, as a concomitant movement, agency is removed from the child in her own success or lack thereof. It would seem that parents are agents for their children, and therefore they are the ones who bear all the responsibility (as individuals) for both their own actions and those of their children. This leads to the rather bizarre situation in which an individual is not responsible for their own outcomes (that was their parents' work) but is responsible for the outcomes of the next generation.

What can parental engagement with children's learning do in the face of systematic inequalities?

One of the main thrusts of this article is that nothing exists without context. Parenting is not done in isolation; individuals exist in relationship to others (Kumagai and Lypson 2009). This concept underpins all the work around parental engagement and the home learning environment. Yes, as Gorski points out, another myth that pervades our work and beyond is 'the one that dubs education "the great equalizer" – due to the inequalities in our system, he says, "it cannot be anything of the sort" (Gorski 2008, 35). And it cannot be this equalizer, or compensate for society, because it does not happen in isolation, to identical units. Children come to school and schooling with a wealth of experiences (indeed, a lifetime's experience, for the child). The 'equal' education we provide is based on expectations which do not apply to all children. We need to critically examine and reflect on, and if necessary, change, our own work, to ensure that it is contextualized or at least contextualisable by and for practitioners.

Indeed, one of the issues which has been raised about the concept of teaching parenting practices or skills is that this often happens in a way that is decontextualised, unsituated,

as though parenting for all families, all situations, will require the same skills (Gillies 2005). The literature has been clear on this for some time (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011), yet this is often curiously absent from the policy documents about parental support. When parenting support programmes fail to be contexutalised, and fail to adhere to the culture and values of the participants, the outcomes may be far from certain (Cairney 2000, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011).

A longtime advocate and support of parental engagement with children's learning, I am not attempting here to negate the value of parental support of learning. There is a wealth of literature showing that such engagement can be beneficial for many children. What such support cannot do, and should be called upon to do, is to overcome or even mask the systemic issues which have also been clearly shown to impact on academic and other outcomes. We must not continue in the current situation in which there is a belief that 'educational inequality and social immobility can be tackled through effective parenting' (Hartas 2015, 32); not only does this place an unfair burden on parents, it leaves unchallenged the system which has resulted in the inequality and social immobility. I would argue that our remit needs to be wider, as does our reflective thinking about that work.

A call to conscientization in parental engagement

What I am asking for is, in effect, a conscientisation (Freire 1970) of the work around the engagement of parents in their children's learning. This is not a work of abstraction; the reason for critiquing the status quo is to set a direction (or many) for change. I am saying that our work should continue after – or at least while – we undergo this process of bringing-to-mind and deep reflection, so that the outcomes of our work are long lasting change not only to children but provide challenges to the systemic issues that create the need for our work in the first place. I ask that we produce work which is

academically rigorous, which takes account of culture and context – both our own and that of the people we work with - and that we become aware of and then critique the current social order.

I said at the outset that I would not attempt to answer the questions posed in this article; instead, I hope that the discussion above has allowed us to reframe and expand them. These questions can form the basis of a research agenda for the next generation – both the next generation of researchers but far more importantly, the next generation of parents and children.

1. Does the discourse of a culture of poverty inform our work?

Can become: How do we acknowledge this discourse and how do we counter it? How do we, in our work to eradicate injustice and inequality, avoid seeing parenting as context free, unencumbered by the system in which it takes place?

How can our work with parents, policy makers, practitioners and the public support the call of Small et al to 'debunk existing myths about the cultural orientations of the poor' (2010, 10)? We need to be mindful of how our work, both research and practice, serves to 'reinforce existing power relations between educational institutions and families' (Cairney 2002, 153) and, once mindful of this process, seek to avoid or counteract it.

A further difficult question we need to address, both as practitioners and researchers, is the relationship between short and long term outcomes. If our work with parents helps to raise achievement for children in schools now, is it still worth doing this work if the very way that work is couched and undertaken serves to maintain the status quo – eg the unequal society that made the work necessary in the first place? Is a concern for the wider ramifications of our work a luxury we cannot afford – or an obligation we must not shirk?

I doubt the dichotomy is quite as stark as I have painted it but unless we examine the brush strokes, we may miss the point of the picture entirely.

2. How private is the private sphere?

Can become: How do we disaggregate all of the different discourses, and put our work back together in a way that allow us – and more importantly, the practitioners we support – to carry on the good work being done in ways that challenge, rather than perpetuate the problematic discourses?

3. What do we mean by 'good parenting'?

Can become: How do we get back to a focus on what is best for an individual child?

4. Why do we ignore gender?

Can become: how can we notice, acknowledge and overcome the gendered presumptions in so much work around parenting?

5. What can parental engagement with children's learning do in the face of systemic inequalities?

Can become: How can we support parents to engage with learning – and others to engage with parents – in ways that challenge, if not dismantle, systemic inequities?

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